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South Korea: Chun Consolidates Power

One year after Chun Doo Hwan's election as the first President of the Fifth Republic, South Korea is more stable politically than at any time since before the assassination of Park Chung Hee in 1979. Chun has moved with increasing confidence to consolidate and expand his base of support, and there is today no group or individual in the political system strong enough to challenge him.

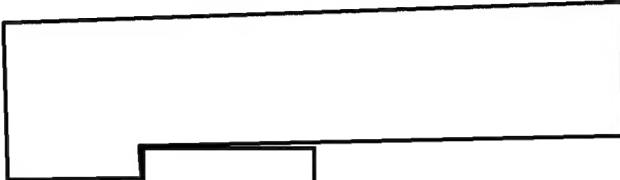
Chun's "New Era"—with its new Constitution, new faces, and new slogans—differs little, however, from that of Park. If anything, the restrictions on freedom of speech and political activity are more stringent.

Nonetheless, the majority of Koreans support Chun's administration and his image has greatly improved in recent months. Most South Koreans remain far more concerned with national security and economic progress, and the test of Chun's leadership will rest on his ability to deliver in these areas.

The Military

Chun has been careful to ensure that his supporters continue to dominate key Army command and staff positions. He has skillfully neutralized those senior officers who could threaten his position by retiring them to prestigious government positions.

The military is not completely satisfied with Chun's performance, however.



Civilian Politics

Chun exercises effective control over the domestic political process through the Democratic Justice Party (DJP), now firmly established as the largest and most effective political organization in the country. It has built a strong financial base, drawing particularly on support from the business community. The financially strapped Democratic Korea Party (DKP) and the other minority parties are frustrated by their inability to gain greater public support, particularly from business.

Chun has shown a greater interest in the parliament than did Park. He has taken the initiative in establishing a dialogue with the National Assembly and uses it as a forum for introducing his own programs, in the process giving the lawmakers a greater sense of participation. The new National Assembly, however, has been little more than a rubber stamp. Because the government controls the media so tightly, few assemblymen are willing to challenge the regime head on. Nor is there any charismatic figure who could galvanize a political opposition.

Public Image

Chun has grown in stature as he has legitimized his hold on power, but he still enjoys at best only passive support from most of the population. He has, therefore, concentrated on enhancing his image, using the government-controlled media and his flair for the dramatic to great advantage. The President has

...ed to improve his popular image through a series of well-planned diplomatic moves designed to strengthen Seoul's international standing and boost national pride. His meetings last year with President Sagan, with the heads of the ASEAN nations on a tour of Southeast Asia, and with other chiefs of state in Seoul have served this end. Chun can also take the credit for Seoul's being selected as the site for the 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Summer Olympics. Chun, in addition, has demonstrated his nationalist credentials by taking a tough stand in economic negotiations with Tokyo thereby appealing to South Koreans' strong anti-Japanese sentiments. The President is also capitalizing on the public's strong desire for national reunification through his offer last year to meet with Kim Il-song and his comprehensive program for Korean reunification announced in January. Chun clearly believes this approach will strengthen his domestic image as the only national leader capable of dealing with Kim Il-song. [redacted]

Some Opposition Persists

Despite his general acceptance, Chun is still hated and feared by many. The thousands of victims of his urges of the government, the media, labor unions, and the schools remain nonpersons. Although some have been permitted to travel abroad and to seek jobs in other fields, a large number have not yet been reinstated. Feelings against him are particularly intense in the Cholla Provinces because of the military's bloody suppression of the Kwangju insurrection in May 1980. [redacted]

Active resistance to the Chun regime has been relatively minor, however. Only university students have engaged in noteworthy antigovernment activity. A small core of student radicals has attempted to agitate the moderate majority to abandon their acceptance of the regime and develop a more confrontational stance. Frustrated by their failure, the radicals last fall resorted to violence against their professors and began to use leftist rhetoric and anti-American slogans in their propaganda. Concerned by this new trend, the government responded with a campaign to isolate the radicals from the public, stigmatizing their rhetoric as Communist inspired, a charge that is probably only partially true. [redacted]

The Christian churches have been neutralized as serious threats despite their history of successful antigovernment activity during the latter years of Park's rule. There have been some efforts to stir up protests, but Chun has dealt with Christian groups skillfully, meeting with the church leaders and listening to their grievances. He has made some minor concessions, but remains adamant that the churches refrain from using their pulpits as political forums.

[redacted]

Economic Challenges

Chun's biggest problem in maintaining stability and enhancing his image is the economy. He presided over a significant economic recovery last year, with GNP registering a 7-percent growth. Stringent monetary and fiscal policies succeeded in drastically lowering the inflation rate, exports were up, and unemployment dropped slightly. But he must sustain the country's economic recovery while reducing the gap between the haves and the have-nots. To the average Korean, the recent improvements have not been so apparent, and there is much disenchantment with the government's economic performance. Fueling this dissatisfaction was a weakening of the economy in the last quarter of 1981. A significant improvement in the economy, particularly in real wages, is not expected until the second half of this year. [redacted]

Maintaining stability will hinge to some extent on the government's ability to prevent serious labor unrest during the economic slump. To continue its anti-inflation strategy and keep South Korean industrial exports competitive, the government this year is again seeking to keep the lid on wage hikes. Workers are not happy, but probably will grudgingly accept the government's informal guidelines. To minimize the potential for labor disputes stemming from business closings, delinquent wages, and reduced work hours, the authorities will intervene where necessary, using administrative guidance and purging factories of potential militant leaders. [redacted]

Another Spring

The security services are gearing up to handle the usual round of campus disturbances this spring. To [redacted]



Radicals are likely to continue their leftist rhetoric and anti-American themes but anti-Americanism is not likely to spread beyond the campuses. In the past, workers have rebuffed student efforts to form an antigovernment student-worker alliance. Moreover,



Given the government's extensive surveillance activity and overall tight controls, we anticipate that student activity this spring will be readily contained and will not generate additional protests by workers or Christian activists. Chun recognizes, however, that for both domestic and international reasons it is important to liberalize his political system, and he can be expected at a minimum to use clemency and other symbolic gestures to keep pressure from building on human rights questions. Indeed, the large-scale amnesty for political prisoners Chun granted this month on the first anniversary of his presidency—which included the reduction of convicted dissident Kim Dae Jung's life sentence to 20 years—underscores his determination to move in this direction. [redacted]

